



***Right, members of the Nellis Boys and Girls Club put the finishing touches on the bird houses they recently completed. The group built three of the homes for the Burrowing Owls inhabiting Sunrise Vista Golf Course. Several more of the habitats will be built and placed throughout the golf course in the rough, natural areas scattered around the course.***



***Left, a Burrowing Owl prepares to enter its den near the driving range on Sunrise Vista Golf Course. Upper right, a finished bird-condo just prior to covering it with soil. Right, a mature Burrowing Owl returns to his nest after an unsuccessful hunting trip. Like a typical owl, the noises these owls can make include ‘coos’ and ‘hoots.’ But there is one notable exception. When cornered, the juvenile owls will make a rattlesnake sound that can scare off most predators, including humans.***



Photos by Airman 1st Class Ashley Sorrels

# Threatened raptors get new condos on golf course

**By Staff Sgt. Jim Bianchi  
AWFC Public Affairs**

As golfers look for their stray balls along the rough, desert areas adjacent to the newest nine-hole addition to the Sunrise Vista Golf Course, they should pay close attention.

Besides the F-15s flying overhead, at eye level there are other kinds of birds flying around. Raptors are here, hunting, diving and searching for food. Maybe they even carried off that new Titleist.

These are not large, dangerous birds-of-prey. Standing only 10 inches tall, Burrowing Owls live in the ground, hunt rodents and other small prey and rarely fly higher than the flag on a putting green. They aren't dangerous; however they are a threatened species.

"These are very small, low-flying birds," said Mr. Danny Fielder, golf course superintendent. "They are not a bird-strike hazard to the aircraft at Nellis."

A few months ago, Mr. Fielder had an idea. Turn 15 acres of the golf course's unused, rough, over-grown desert into a lush natural habitat to support the Burrowing Owl. The labor-intensive project required construction skills, digging, sweating and most of all, teamwork in the hot summer sun.

Active in the community, Mr. Fielder knew Nellis' Boys

and Girls Club had the necessary manpower to complete the construction project and the project would give the teens a chance to build something permanent on Nellis.

"Mr. Fielder asked if we wanted to help, and I said sure," said Ms. Cindy Berg, teen director of Nellis Boys and Girls Club. "The teens did it all. They measured, cut the wood, laid it out, everything."

Using plans from Nevada's Fish and Game Department, Mr. Fielder said the teens had no problem making three homes for the owls.

"The whole thing is underground, with an opening just big enough for a bird to walk through," said Mr. Fielder. "You could walk right up to one and not even know it's there."

Fifty or so owls live on the golf course in groups called clutches. Each clutch is approximately five birds. Currently a majority of clutches are near the culvert south of the driving range. "I'm not sure how many birds will use our three habitats, but the theory is 'build it and they will come,'" said Mr. Fielder quoting from a popular baseball movie.

According to [www.owlpages.com/species/burrowing/](http://www.owlpages.com/species/burrowing/), there are many things that make these owls unique. An important one is when juvenile Burrowing Owls are threatened in the nest, they make a sound like a rattlesnake, often scaring and driving off bigger predators.

But even that unique defense mechanism hasn't kept the owl's numbers from declining. In Nevada as with most Western states, Burrowing Owls are a threatened species. Besides natural predators, the low-flying and ground-dwelling owls have a new and even more deadly predator, man. Frequently the owls are killed by passing cars and other vehicles without the drivers ever knowing it. Loss of natural habitat also contributes to the Burrowing Owls problems.

The World Wildlife Fund recommends returning a habitat to its natural state whenever possible to help with the long-term survival of the species.

"We want the community to see us as more than a golf course, we are good neighbors and good to the environment," said Mr. Fielder.

Foster Tillman, a 15-year-old member of Nellis Boys and Girls Club, eagerly waits to attack a mound of dirt with his shovel. He and his dozen or so friends carefully listen to instructions given by the supervising adults. When it's time, he tackles the job with an enthusiasm born of youth, moving a dusty mixture of dirt over the bird condominium, not knowing he has partially filled one shoe with dirt and that he will be carrying a few ounces of the golf course home with him tonight.

"I just wanted to do something good for the community and the owls," he said, shaking his foot slightly.